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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [IR](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI SPY SHOW ANGERS IRANIANS

REF: A. TD-314/80799-07
[1](#)B. TD-314/79815-07

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Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: Iran reacted angrily to a December 14 Baku Public Service Television 'special program' in which several Azerbaijani nationals confessed to spying for Iran and having connections with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Characterizing the allegations as "anti-Iranian propaganda" and attributing them to "foreign hands," Iran summoned Azerbaijan's ambassador to refute the allegations and call for a formal apology. While it is still unclear why the Azerbaijani Ministry of National Security (MNS) made public the details surrounding this case, Azerbaijani political analysts and the media, as well as the Government of Azerbaijan (GOAJ), believe that this group posed a serious threat to Azerbaijan's sovereignty. End Summary.

Details Surrounding the Mahdi Army Group

[1](#)2. (C) On December 14, an Azerbaijani television broadcast provided details about a group of fifteen Azerbaijani nationals calling themselves the "Mahdi Army Group," under the leadership of Said Dadashbeyli, convicted on December 10 by the Azerbaijani Serious Crimes Court of plotting to overthrow the government and establishing Shari'ah law with the support of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (ref a). The broadcast also alleged that the group had sought information about U.S., Israeli, and other foreign diplomatic interests in Azerbaijan, as well as details about the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline.

[1](#)3. (C) According to the broadcast, the Azerbaijani nationals confessed to spying for Iran and having connections with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). MAG members reportedly visited Iran in 2005 and 2006, some undergoing training while there. MAG members allegedly collected over "150 pieces of information," something they were paid over USD 10,300 for by the IRGC. To support these claims, excerpts of the suspects' questioning and other undercover images were shown on the broadcast.

Iranian and Azerbaijani Reaction

[1](#)4. (C) Iran reacted angrily to the broadcast, characterizing the allegations as "anti-Iranian propaganda" and attributing

them to "foreign hands." Consistent with prior flare-ups in Azerbaijani-Iranian relations, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ali Hosseini said "the political will of the leadership of Iran and Azerbaijan is aimed at preserving and boosting bilateral relations, and we should not permit others to damage these relations." Hosseini called on the Baku government to either prove the allegations or to apologize for them. Azerbaijan's ambassador to Tehran was summoned to the foreign ministry on December 16 so that Iran could refute the allegations and demand a formal apology. The story has figured prominently in the Iranian media, including Azeri-language Seher Television programming.

15. (C) Well-regarded political commentator Rasim Musabayov told us that he believes the publicly-available information on the MAG, namely that the GOAJ thwarted a group of terrorist operatives backed by Iran. Musabayov commented that in general, the GOAJ seeks to deal with these cases quietly, so as not to enter into a public war of words with Tehran. At the same time, the GOAJ takes the threat of Iranian-backed terrorism seriously and, accordingly, the defendants were sentenced to send a clear message to Tehran and the world that the GOAJ will not tolerate these types of threats to its national sovereignty. While the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs has yet to comment on the story, commentary in many Azerbaijani newspapers - both government and opposition - has tracked closely with Musabayov's statement.

16. (C) In a December 17 discussion, MFA spokesman Khazar Ibrahim led Embassy A/DCM to understand that the MFA was surprised by the December 14 airing of the broadcast on the Iranian spy confessions, which he admitted was a MNS initiative. Asked whether the broadcast would damage bilateral relations with Iran, Ibrahim said that "the MNS does what it has to do to preserve the nation's security" and

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"there are always problems" in the relationship with Iran. He added that the MFA had no public comments on the show, but would let the Embassy know if that changed.

Comment

17. (S/NF) Normally the GOAJ seeks to avoid confrontation with its southern neighbor Iran whenever possible, preferring to handle matters quietly. The recent closure of all Imam Khomeini Foundation activities in Azerbaijan indicates this preference, the GOAJ having shut down this organization in a quiet, non-public manner so as not to provoke a fight with the Iranians (ref b). That said, when the GOAJ evaluates a threat to be serious - as it did when its airspace was violated by Iranian helicopters in the summer of 2007 - it responds in a more public, yet still graduated manner. Having assessed the MAG threat as a real and present danger, the GOAJ through the MNS chose to take on the Iranians in a direct, more public manner. However, the television show's focus on the conspirators' IRGC, vice Islamic Republic of Iran, connection also can be seen as providing a face-saving distinction to the Iranian government and thus minimize any lasting damage to the bilateral relationship.

18. (S/NF) The GOAJ focus on an alleged IRGC connection could have been motivated by an interest to demonstrate solidarity, if not curry favor, with the U.S. Revealing this incident publicly may have also served to highlight for Western audiences that Azerbaijan is under threat from religious extremism, including state-sponsored efforts by Iran, a point the GOAJ consistently emphasizes in our bilateral meetings. The revelation of a threat to diplomatic missions is new, and in GRPO's view may be an embellishment. MNS had previously shared nearly all details of this case from January to March with GRPO, information GRPO deemed to be credible (ref a and others).

19. (S/NF) It remains to be seen whether this GOAJ signal of its displeasure with an attempt to meddle in its internal affairs will cause lasting damage to its bilateral ties with Iran. Consistent with previous flare-ups in Azerbaijani-Iranian relations, Iran will most likely continue to deny any involvement publicly while seeking to create the impression that an outside actor was ultimately behind these "anti-Iranian propaganda" efforts.

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